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Report of the Working Group on the use of mercenaries as a means of violating human rights and impeding the exercise of the right of peoples to self-determination on its mission to Belgium

Note by the Secretariat

The Secretariat has the honour to transmit to the Human Rights Council the report of the Working Group on the use of mercenaries as a means of violating human rights and impeding the exercise of the right of peoples to self-determination on its mission to Belgium from 12 to 16 October 2015. The Working Group conducted the mission as part of its year-long study on the growing phenomenon of foreign fighters. The aim of the study is to assess linkages between the foreign fighter phenomenon and mercenarism, and the impact of the foreign fighter phenomenon on human rights. The report presents the main findings of the Working Group and focuses on the definition and scope of foreign fighters in the context of the visit, as well as motivational factors, recruitment and the situation of returnees. The report also covers the measures taken by the Government to address the foreign fighter phenomenon. The Working Group provides recommendations to assist the Government in that endeavour, with particular focus on the respect, protection and fulfilment of human rights.

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Report of the Working Group on the use of mercenaries as a means of violating human rights and impeding the exercise of the right of peoples to self-determination on its mission to Belgium*

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* Circulated in the language of submission only.

I. Introduction

1. The Working Group on the use of mercenaries as a means of violating human rights and impeding the exercise of the right of peoples to self-determination visited Belgium at the invitation of the Government, from 12 to 16 October 2015. The delegation was composed of the Chair-Rapporteur from Poland, Elzbieta Karska, and a Working Group member from Chile, Patricia Arias, as well as staff from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Geneva and interpreters.

2. The Working Group wishes to thank the Government of Belgium for its openness and excellent cooperation in facilitating the visit. It also thanks the staff of OHCHR in Brussels for the support and assistance they provided for the visit.

3. Pursuant to Commission on Human Rights resolution 2005/2, Human Rights Council resolution 30/6 and General Assembly resolution 70/142, the Working Group is mandated to monitor mercenaries and mercenary-related activities in all their forms and manifestations globally. The mandate also includes monitoring the activities of private companies offering military assistance, consulting and security services on the international market, and their effects on the enjoyment of human rights, particularly the right to self-determination.

4. In 2014, the Working Group decided to explore the growing phenomenon of foreign fighters, in order to assess any possible linkages with mercenarism and the impacts on human rights and the right of peoples to self-determination. The Working Group conducted a year-long study that included a series of expert meetings, panel events and extensive research on the subject of foreign fighters in order to prepare its 2015 report to the General Assembly. An official visit to Tunisia in July 2015 (see A/HRC/33/43/Add.1) and the visit to Belgium were undertaken as part of efforts to gather concrete information for the report.

5. During the visit, the delegation met with representatives from the executive, legislative and judicial branches of the State. They included the Minister of Justice, the Minister of the Interior, the Minister of Youth Aid and Houses of Justice of the French Community, the Minister for Welfare, Public Health and Family of the Flemish government, the Minister of Internal Administration, Civic Education, Housing, Equal Opportunities and the Fight against Poverty of the Flemish government, the Parliamentary Commissions on Internal Affairs and Justice, the Chief of Staff of the Minister of Defence, the federal Prosecutor and the Director for Human Rights of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The delegation also participated in a seminar on the prevention of radicalization organized by the federal Ministry of the Interior, which included the prevention cell of the Ministry of the Interior, coordinators working on radicalization in the Flemish and French-speaking communities and in the regions of Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels, as well as in the cities and municipalities of Brussels, Liège, Anderlecht, Antwerp and Vilvoorde.

6. The delegation also met with the Counter-Terrorism Coordinator of the European Union and the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly Rapporteur on Foreign Fighters in the Syrian Arab Republic, as well as civil society representatives, academics and experts on the issues of radicalization and countering violent extremism in Belgium. Meetings were also held with a convicted returnee and relatives of persons who had travelled to the conflict zone in the Syrian Arab Republic.

II. Background and context of the visit

7. The visit of the Working Group coincided with a time of heightened concern in Belgium following a series of terrorist attacks and terrorism-related incidents. They

included the May 2014 attack at the Jewish Museum of Belgium in Brussels, the January 2015 attack on the *Charlie Hebdo* headquarters in Paris, and the January 2015 raids in Verviers. One month after the visit, on 13 November, deadly attacks took place in Paris. On 22 March 2016, further attacks were perpetrated in Brussels killing over 30 people and injuring hundreds of others. The perpetrators of most of those attacks have reportedly been linked to Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and the perpetrators of the attack in Paris have reportedly been linked to Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula. Belgium has thus encountered significant challenges to its national security and has had to adopt a number of counter-terrorism measures. The current context is also framed by the political circumstances particular to Belgium, where the complex State structure consists of several levels of governance: the federal State, the regions and communities, and the cities and municipalities, each having different powers and responsibilities, depending on the competence. Based on information provided by government officials, it is noted that, within the limits of their competences, communities and regions are autonomous and independent, with regard to the federal State and to each other. The communities and regions have parliaments, the members of which are directly elected, and governments, which are distinct from the federal State's legislative and executive power.

8. In accordance with article 2 of the Constitution, Belgium comprises three communities: the Flemish Community, the French Community and the German-speaking Community. "Communitization" reportedly responded to a demand for real recognition and development of a specific language and culture. In accordance with article 3 of the Constitution, Belgium comprises three regions: the Flemish Region, the Walloon Region and the Brussels Region. "Regionalization" reportedly responded to the desire for autonomy in socioeconomic fields. In territorial terms, the regions do not correspond to the three communities. Communities and regions mainly differ by dint of their different material competences.

9. Communities and regions are responsible for a defined list of competences. The Belgian legislator identified the subject matters that are allocated to communities and regions. The allocations are combined with reserves of competence for the federal State. The federal level also holds residual competence, namely competences that are not allocated to communities or regions. Unlike the federal State, which is competent for the Belgian territory, the communities and the regions only intervene in the territory of their community or region.

10. On a federal level, legislative and executive authorities are in charge of a series of competence areas relating to matters of interest that are common to all Belgians, such as defence, security, a proportion of international relations, social security and economic and monetary policy. The judicial system is also organized by the federal State. Community competencies cover cultural matters, teaching, the use of languages, health policy, family policy, policy regarding persons with disabilities, and other "customizable" matters. Regional competencies encompass regional development and town planning, environment and water policy, renovation and nature conservation, housing, agricultural, maritime and fishing policy, economy, energy policy, subordinate powers, employment policy and public works and transport.

11. It is noteworthy that, in principle, autonomy allows each region or community to exercise its competences without consulting other institutions or the federal State. However, in some cases, the Belgian legislator provides for mandatory cooperation mechanisms prior to the exercise of certain competences. The State and the federal entities may also conclude "cooperation agreements", in particular concerning the joint creation and management of common services and institutions, the combined exercise of specific competences or the development of common initiatives.

12. In the specific context of the response to the foreign fighter phenomenon, the Working Group was informed that, based on each level's specific competences, the federal level has assumed the role of instigating repressive measures, while preventive measures were allocated for action partly at the federal level, such as the BOUNCE project providing support to the families of foreign fighters, and predominantly at the level of the regions, communities, cities and municipalities, with the federal level setting up a prevention platform involving all of the above.

13. In terms of the socioeconomic factors behind the phenomenon, it is noted that most Belgian nationals and residents of non-European heritage are of lower socioeconomic status, and face particular difficulties in accessing employment. They are also more likely to have a lower level of education and experience discrimination in the workplace, even when highly educated. In addition, Belgium has to contend with a high level of youth unemployment, with 23.6 per cent of the population under age 25 unemployed.[1]

III. Definition and scope

14. Belgian law does not recognize the concepts of "foreign fighters" or "foreign terrorist fighters". Rather, it recognizes the concept of "combatants" as defined by conventional and customary rules of international humanitarian law. In its 2015 report to the General Assembly (A/70/330), the Working Group acknowledged that there was no international legal definition of "foreign fighter" and that the term was generally understood to refer to individuals who leave their country of origin or habitual residence and become involved in violence as part of an insurgency or non-State armed group in an armed conflict.

15. In Belgium, the law of 1 August 1979 on services in an army or foreign troops on the territory of a foreign State, as amended by the Act of 22 April 2003, refers to "those in a foreign army or troop situated in the territory of a foreign state". Article 2 of the law requires the adoption of a royal decree, which has never occurred.

16. Article 140 *sexies* of the Belgian Criminal Code was introduced into the Code by the Act of 20 July 2015 to strengthen the fight against terrorism. It condemns individuals, regardless of nationality, who are leaving or entering the country in order to commit, in Belgium or abroad, a terrorist offence, as defined in that article. Convicted offenders can be punished with 5 to 10 years' imprisonment and a fine of 100 to 5,000 euros. The new law also extends to all terrorist offences the possibility of using specific search methods, and gives the judge the possibility of revoking nationality for such acts for those who have dual nationality and under a number of conditions.

17. The Working Group received information that there were some 207 Belgians in the Syrian Arab Republic, of whom 77 had died and 128 had returned. In addition, 62 Belgians had tried but failed to get to the Syrian Arab Republic or Iraq or had been brought back. It was estimated that between 5 and 10 Belgians had been in Afghanistan since 2011, and another 5 to 10 were in Somalia. Some 46 foreign fighters had been prosecuted under the Belgian Criminal Code on charges relating to terrorism in the framework of the Sharia4Belgium trial, including some who were reportedly still in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic. It was reported that the number of foreign fighters leaving the country was currently dwindling to an estimated five every month compared to earlier years, when there had been 12 leaving every month.

[1] See http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.ZS, accessed on 19 April 2016.

18. The Working Group was informed that between April and September 2015, 13 persons were en route to the Syrian Arab Republic, 16 had reportedly died there, 14 had returned to Belgium and 11 had failed in their attempts to reach the Syrian Arab Republic. Up to the time of the Working Group's visit, a total of 62 individuals had been stopped from travelling to the Syrian Arab Republic, while 412 were either in, or had been to, that country. Around 55 females were known to be in the Syrian Arab Republic.

19. The Working Group acknowledges that accurate figures are difficult to verify, and that different definitions of foreign fighters may affect related accounting.

20. The Working Group was informed that the greatest number of foreign fighters is reported to come from Brussels, the next greatest number from Antwerp, then Vilvoorde in the province of Flemish Brabant, although the number from there appears to be declining. Much smaller numbers of foreign fighters were known to have come from the provinces of Liège, Namur and East and West Flanders.

IV. Motivational factors

21. The Working Group was informed that, while the profiles of foreign fighters were diverse, their average age was around 23 years, but was decreasing, with one case of a 13-year-old recruit. It was estimated that over 50 per cent of foreign fighters from Belgium were Belgians of Moroccan ancestry. Women were also increasingly leaving Belgium to join conflicts abroad, with most reported cases in the Syrian Arab Republic.

22. Motivations were also reported to be varied. Among the motivations identified were the need for a sense of belonging and acceptance, the search for a livelihood, escaping a criminal background, religious convictions, "humanitarian" reasons and "adventure". For some, the promise of a wife might also be an incentive. Motivations might also change over time, such as from "humanitarian" to "ideological".

23. Of specific interest to the Working Group is the question of payment. Evidence gathered during the visit indicated that some foreign fighters received a salary, and were also provided with free housing, access to swimming pools, occasional gifts or donations, and might be supported to bring over wives and children to live with them. It was also reported that some fighters received an allowance for daily living expenses in the amount of approximately 700 euros a month, and that foreign fighters received a higher salary than local Syrian fighters.

24. For operational purposes, the Ministry of Defence identifies six typical profiles of Belgian foreign terrorist fighters:

(a) The fighter who is convinced of the doctrine and ideology, has a deep understanding of Islam and is in pursuit of martyrdom;

(b) The fighter who has a shallow level of conviction and joins as part of a subculture or as part of an adventure, is concerned with superficial appearance and trappings such as a beard or an AK-47, and seeks the opportunity for marriage;

(c) The fighter who has a problematic past and has been involved in youth crime, and is seeking respect;

(d) The fighter who succumbs to peer pressure, and is rapidly and superficially radicalized;

(e) The fighter who is running from the police or debts, and is seeking power or pleasure;

(f) The fighter who is highly educated, frustrated by discrimination, wants to fight the system, and is challenged by questions of identity.

25. According to the authorities, the majority of foreign fighters have a low level of education, come from difficult family circumstances and have been involved in petty crime. In the 2012 wave of travels to the Syrian Arab Republic, many fighters were reportedly seeking to fight President Assad in the Syrian Arab Republic, and most of them joined Al-Nusrah Front. Some young people were motivated by the apparent "success" of ISIL, and joined it as the "winning" side.

26. Against that backdrop, deradicalization may be viewed as more of a societal endeavour, thus requiring issues to be addressed at a societal level, in addition to discrete programmes for specific individuals whose individualistic motivations may require a more tailor-made approach and support for their families.

27. Academics characterize the current foreign fighter phenomenon as part of a youth subculture that has developed against a very specific social and international context. Radicalization is viewed as a socialization process in which group dynamics, that is, kinship and friendship, are more important than ideology, and there is a sense of inequality and estrangement from society.[2] In the same vein, other studies depict foreign fighters as "Islamized radicals" rather than "radicalized Islamists".[3]

28. The sense of estrangement is reportedly felt more by the more dispersed community of Belgians of Moroccan descent than other migrant communities, such as Belgians of Turkish descent. The absence of a structured overall Muslim community has also been noted by observers, which includes the fact that a number of imams are not from Belgium, do not speak the local language and may not be acquainted with Belgian history and culture. There were also reports of occasional tensions between the Muslim Shiite and Sunni communities. Third-generation Muslims whose grandparents were migrants may not feel a strong sense of being rooted in society and may experience intergenerational friction. They may also not feel represented politically.

29. The ban on wearing clothing that covers the face, or a large part of it, also known as the ban on full-face veils, as well as the decision of a series of schools and administrations to ban headscarves, may also reportedly contribute to feelings of alienation among Muslims in Belgium, in addition to the concentration of Muslim and migrant communities in areas characterized by a low average income. Reportedly, those communities feel a sense of discrimination and marginalization from social, economic and political opportunities, including in the labour market, where discrimination based on descent is reportedly frequent. Young people may also identify with a sense of injustice among Muslim populations globally as a result of ongoing conflicts such as the Israeli-Palestine conflict and the purported attacks on the Syrian people by their Government.

30. The Working Group learned that more recently, the majority of foreign fighters have joined ISIL, and a smaller number Al-Nusrah Front, while a few opt for Suqur al-Sham (the Falcons of the Levant) or the Shia militia in Iraq. The Free Syrian Army reportedly remains composed almost exclusively of Syrians.

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[2] Rik Coolsaet, *What drives Europeans to Syria, and to IS? Insights from the Belgian case. Egmont Paper 75* (Gent, Egmont Royal Institute for International Relations, Academia Press, March 2015, update June 2015).

[3] Georges Allemagne and others, "Radicalisme : conséquence d'une fracture ?" (Centre d'Etudes Politiques Economiques et Sociales, Juin 2015).

V. Recruitment

31. The departure of fighters to the Syrian Arab Republic from Belgium proceeded in waves. The first wave was characterized by association with Sharia4Belgium in 2010. From 2010 to 2011, Sharia4Belgium reportedly recruited on the streets, including through distributing flyers in Dutch, and would host "religious" meetings in Antwerp.

32. Peer recruitment was more prevalent from 2012. Young people reportedly made contact on social media or met in person, for example on the streets, in sports or music clubs and at theatre groups, sharing stories and photographs portraying life in the Syrian Arab Republic as one of freedom, camaraderie and material affluence. Since 2014, the main method of recruitment is reportedly through informal networks of friends and family, and through social media.

33. Available information indicates that a significant degree of recruitment is also undertaken through friends and family in the Syrian Arab Republic who are paid on the basis of the number of people they recruit and whether the recruits subsequently marry.

34. Many foreign fighters are reportedly radicalized through online propaganda and discussions with peers. Elements of the propaganda are reported to comprise loyalty to the group and rejection of others, notably "unbelievers", the notions that idols must be destroyed and that democracy is a man-made law followed by "infidels", and the interpretation of jihad as an offensive war.

35. The Belgian authorities reportedly monitor the social media pages of suspected or returned foreign fighters. They also remove extremist content from the Internet on the basis of judicial action, and are seeking permission to take such action on an administrative basis. Use of public social media has reportedly decreased, and more people are using closed forums. Furthermore, the use of counter-narratives may be counterproductive, as recruiters alert candidates and use it in their indoctrination, saying that it is a form of manipulation.

36. The Working Group learned that women were recruited primarily to give moral support to the fighters and for ideological reasons. Women are reportedly told that men in Europe are "infidels" who would not lead them to "paradise", but that if they marry a jihadi, they will be rewarded.

37. Recruiters facilitate the departure of recruits from Belgium by providing religious education, money, airline tickets, travel documentation, clothes and the contact details of persons to meet in the Syrian Arab Republic. Reportedly, recruiters were paid 5,000 to 7,000 euros for each recruit. The period of radicalization is reportedly becoming shorter and is currently estimated to be two or three months.

38. The Working Group was informed that often engagement with Islam has been short-term or superficial, and is less based on traditional formal instruction than self-teaching.

39. It is also reported that foreign fighters are routinely taken to the Syrian Arab Republic through Adana, then Antalya in Turkey. Turkey may be especially attractive owing to its close proximity to the Syrian Arab Republic and the availability of cheap flights. Based on bilateral cooperation, many foreign fighters are stopped and returned by the Turkish authorities.

40. With respect to the use of the Internet for radicalization, one study commissioned by the Ministry of the Interior in 2012 and published in 2014 concluded that exposure to extremist content was one of the major drivers for political and religious violence, but only for those who were either socially vulnerable or otherwise had a certain propensity to

extremism.[8] Based on quantitative and qualitative research involving 6,000 individuals, the study noted that deeper "causes of the causes" are poor social integration, perceived procedural injustice and perceived discrimination in society. While religious extremism and ideology play a role, foreign fighters are often not well schooled in religious teachings, which thus serve primarily as justifications.

41. The study posits that, up to a certain level, exposure to extremism through social media is not problematic, irrespective of the level of susceptibility and exposure, but that the threat rises exponentially after a certain point. The Working Group recommends that these and other related findings should continue to inform government policy, including on the nature and level of Internet surveillance, and particularly with respect to the protection of human rights. In that regard, the Working Group was told that a commission of three magistrates approved Internet surveillance, and it was informed about the work of the Belgian Privacy Commission. The Working Group also acknowledges the role of institutions such as Ombudspersons, with which individuals can file complaints if they think their rights are being violated.

42. The Working Group calls for special consideration to be given to ensuring freedom of expression, respect for the right to privacy and safeguarding the democratic space, while excluding hate speech from public discourse. The Working Group believes that efforts to the contrary may have the effect of furthering marginalization and radicalization, and may thus be counterproductive in addressing the phenomenon.

VI. International law

43. The 1989 International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries was implemented in Belgium by the Act of 22 April 2003 to ensure the compliance of Belgian law with the International Convention. The Ministry of Justice reportedly considered the application of the Convention in responding to concerns about foreign fighters, but found the concept of "mercenary" inadequate, so decided not to apply it and instead amended the Criminal Code.

44. The Working Group notes with concern the apparent conflating of international humanitarian law with criminal law in the approach to addressing foreign fighters. As elaborated more fully in its 2015 report to the General Assembly, the Working Group recommends that special consideration be given to the scope of international humanitarian law, whereby mere direct participation in hostilities is not prohibited, and persons assuming exclusively non-combat functions are not viewed as directly participating in hostilities. Measures designed to prevent and punish travel for the purpose of engagement in, or support of, terrorism should therefore exempt acts that are otherwise lawful under international humanitarian law.

[8] See Lieven Pauwels, and others, Explaining and understanding the role of exposure to new social media on violent extremism: an integrative quantitative and qualitative approach (Gent, Academia Press, 2014). See also Nele Schils and Lieven Pauwels, "Explaining violent extremism for subgroups by gender and immigrant background, using SAT as a framework", Journal of Strategic Security, vol. 7, No. 3 (Fall 2014); Lieven Pauwels and Maarten De Waele, "Youth involvement in politically motivated violence: why do social integration, perceived legitimacy, and perceived discrimination matter?", International Journal Of Conflict And Violence, vol. 8, No. 1 (Fall 2014); Lieven Pauwels and Nele Schils, "Differential online exposure to radical content and political violence: testing the relative strength of social learning and competing perspectives", Terrorism and Political Violence, (Sept. 2014).

45. The Working Group learned that Belgium is seeking to apply Security Council resolution 2178 (2014) in its national efforts. The Working Group reiterates its concern with respect to the broad application of that resolution, as already noted in its 2015 report to the General Assembly. States such as Belgium (see para. 90 below) have adopted measures that may disproportionately restrict freedom of movement and the rights to citizenship, due process and presumption of innocence, and that unnecessarily expand powers for emergency surveillance, arrest, detention, search and seizure. The Working Group notes that it is difficult to prove levels of intent linked to criminalizing terrorism-related activities. For instance, women who go abroad to marry fighters, send money to fighters, or undergo training may be considered to have participated in activities amounting to terrorism, for which it is challenging to prove intent.

46. Security Council resolution 2178 (2014) addresses foreign terrorist fighters only, not foreign fighters per se. The Working Group therefore emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between the two, especially given the absence of clarity on international legal definitions of the terms "terrorism" and "foreign fighters". More precise definitions of those terms would mitigate misapplication of Security Council resolution 2178 (2014), limit human rights infringements and ensure accurate targeting for accountability. Legal definitions should be used to guide decisions about the political definitions being applied.

VII. Measures

47. The Working Group was informed that a number of measures have been taken by authorities at all levels to counter the issue of foreign fighters. At the federal level, the Ministry of the Interior and its Coordination Unit for Threat Analysis collate information from relevant agencies in its database for assessment.

48. In November 2015, following its visit, the Working Group was informed that the budget for security and the fight against terrorism in Belgium had increased by 400 million euros. Part of the budget would be allocated to the State Security Service and the Ministry of Defence. Further measures have included the reinforcement of police border controls and the deployment of an additional 520 military personnel to assist with security. The number of federal magistrates has also risen, from 24 to 28, two of whom focus specifically on terrorism.

49. A proposed revision of article 12 of the Constitution would allow for 72 hours of administrative detention for acts of terrorism instead of 24 hours. In addition, the law of 7 June 1969 was amended to permit house searches 24 hours a day. Wearing electronic bracelets will also be required for people who are registered by the State Security Services as a threat. The exclusion of "hate preachers" through a screening process can result in such individuals being placed under house arrest, detained in prison, or facing potential expulsion from the country. Places of worship that are not officially recognized by the Government and where jihadism is propagated will also be dismantled. Websites that are identified as "preaching hate" will also be closed down. The screening of potential employees for jobs in sensitive sectors will be reinforced. It is no longer possible to purchase prepaid telephone cards anonymously.

50. On 16 January 2015, 12 measures were announced by the federal Government and a further 18 measures followed in November 2015, covering, inter alia, inclusion of a new terrorism offence in the Criminal Code, extension of the list of offences giving rise to the use of special investigation methods, broadening the scope of withdrawal of nationality and passports, revised monitoring procedures, exchange of information and addressing radicalization in prisons. The Working Group reiterates its call for respect for human rights

in the implementation of those measures, notably for the rights to privacy, to freedom of expression and movement and to a nationality. The first 12 measures are:

(a) Extending terrorist offences and amending the law with a view to more effective punishment, and including travelling abroad for terrorist purposes as a new terrorist offence in the Criminal Code;

(b) Extending the list of offences leading to the use of specific methods of investigation (article 90 ter of the Criminal Procedure Code) to include incitement to terrorism, recruitment, training and travelling abroad for terrorist purposes;

(c) Broadening the scope for withdrawing nationality;

(d) Introducing the possibility of withdrawing passports and identity cards, or refusing to issue them, when the individual in question poses a risk to public order and security;

(e) Activating the legal mechanism for identifying persons involved in financing terrorism and freezing their assets;

(f) Revising the circular of 25 September 2014 concerning information management and monitoring measures for foreign fighters resident in Belgium in order to simplify the current structures, ensure a clearer division of tasks between services and systematize the way in which monitoring is conducted;

(g) Optimizing the exchange of information between administrative and judicial services and authorities;

(h) Revising the 2005 anti-radicalization plan to take account of recent developments;

(i) Combating radicalization in prisons through better detection of radicalized inmates and those who encourage radicalization and the implementation of countermeasures; training of prison staff and collaboration with Islamic advisers are crucial;

(j) Reforming the intelligence and security structures of the National Security Council;

(k) Deploying the army for specific surveillance assignments;

(l) Strengthening the analysis capabilities of the State Security Service.

51. The Working Group observed that recent measures had been developed as a quick response to the threat of foreign fighters, triggered by recent events, but that the responses had not necessarily been informed by in-depth reflection or analysis of the phenomenon.

52. The recent response had been influenced by the fact that the federal level was competent mostly on security and repressive measures, rather than other areas relating more to prevention. An overall integrated plan could not therefore be developed very effectively, and different government entities at different levels developed their individual programmes without coherent cooperation. One notable attempt at coherence was the development by the College of Prosecutors of circulars on foreign fighters, which were sent to all relevant magistrates.

53. The Working Group learned that decision-making has not at times been fully consultative, notably regarding consultation and collaboration with lower levels by higher levels, such as national level competences with regional or community competences. Efforts are further hindered by financing arrangements, including the fact that for some projects, working with cities means working with the federal, regional or community levels as cities are funded by those other levels, despite the assertion of autonomy among the

different levels. These concerns may be among the factors contributing to the prominence given, as observed by the Working Group, to security-oriented and punitive responses, including with respect to financing, in comparison to preventive and rehabilitative approaches. The Working Group thus supports a fully integrated approach to the foreign fighter phenomenon, developed with the widest possible participation by all levels, and reiterates its recommendation for a balance between security, and social and human rights, considerations.

54. The Working Group notes that, since the phenomenon is relatively new for Belgium and measures are only very recently being developed and implemented, it is too early for evaluations to yield assertions of good practice in these efforts.

55. The Working Group was advised of the policy and administrative initiatives under way at the federal, regional and community, and local levels, as detailed below. In general terms, the initiatives reportedly emphasize prevention, criminal law, research, enhanced communication, capacity-building and strengthening of resilience.

56. The Working Group learned that a coordination mechanism for the prevention of radicalization was set up in the Brussels-Capital Region. The Region is reportedly committed to eight concrete actions:

(a) Implementing a structured network of people at different levels of power;

(b) Providing a structured reservoir of resource persons to better understand the phenomenon of radicalization and to act with the appropriate tools;

(c) Initiating, supporting and developing awareness-raising or training;

(d) Informing partners of existing initiatives in the Region and beyond, with the aim of disseminating good practices in Belgium and abroad;

(e) Setting up an information and assistance point for young people, parents or concerned third parties;

(f) Serving as a relay for requests from municipalities to political and judicial authorities to improve monitoring of the phenomenon;

(g) Developing a network of external partners to monitor individual situations;

(h) Seeking support at the federal, European and international levels from recognized experts.

57. It was reported to the Working Group that the French Community and the Wallonia and Brussels Regions intended to mobilize all their stakeholders, including those working in the fields of compulsory and higher education, social advancement education, youth, youth welfare, sports, culture, associations, equal opportunities, the media, the houses of justice and the civil service, to bring sustainable solutions to the root causes of radicalization and its prevention. They had thus established an anti-radicalization network, bringing together different actors from associations, teaching and administration around three themes:

(a) Exchanging best practices in awareness-raising and training programmes for front-line players and ensuring wide dissemination of best practices;

(b) Ensuring and improving the consistency of prevention and educational tools for front-line players using websites, free telephone services, brochures and so forth;

(c) Strengthening knowledge and expertise on the phenomenon of radicalization.

58. A series of initiatives had been taken in terms of training for teachers and staff working with young people, gradually including all federal competency areas that would benefit from specific tools and training.

59. The Flemish government, which encompasses Community and Regional competences, is also taking initiatives. On 16 January 2015, the Flemish government approved a concept paper on the prevention of radicalization processes that can lead to extremism and terrorism, which includes a strategic framework for dealing with radicalization and identifies some key action areas. The action plan reportedly seeks to concretize the concept paper and was developed in consultation with various stakeholders, including representatives of the cities of Antwerp, Vilvoorde, Kortrijk, Mechelen and Maaseik, the Muslim Executive, and relevant embassies.

60. The areas of action in the plan are:

(a) Information sharing, harmonization and coordination, internally and with the other authorities;

(b) Harmonization between the needs of local actors and the subsidizing authorities, including support for projects on education, preventive welfare and youth assistance services in municipalities facing radicalization problems, as well as pathways towards work;

(c) Supralocal expertise development and the sharing of good practices in support of the local prevention of radicalization policy;

(d) Research into the reasons for radicalization, including interdisciplinary exchange;

(e) Support to front-line employees, including care providers, teachers, youth workers and imams, to help them acquire knowledge and skills through education, expertise development and the availability of good practices, comprising, inter alia, train-the-trainer programmes; and supplying expertise on interculturalism to local actors in the municipalities, disseminating guidelines for teachers and other staff employed in pupil guidance centres on how to deal with signs of radicalization, and sharing of information between youth work organizations;

(f) Consultation with representatives of different philosophical beliefs, to facilitate interfaith dialogue and enhance interfaith skills in youngsters and teachers, as well as developing social orientation and Dutch as a second language training for imams;

(g) Support for parents from a network of experts, a help desk for parents, friends and acquaintances of young people who are being radicalized, and harmonization of efforts among the Departments of Education and Welfare, Public Health and Family;

(h) Increase young people's resilience, with the introduction of resilience trainings for youngsters in education, welfare and youth assistance forums;

(i) Reinforce organizations that can support young people in their search for an identity of their own;

(j) Flemish instruments at the disposal of the federal authorities within the framework of deradicalization and the approach to radicalization in prisons;

(k) Active Flemish public diplomacy and investment in sound public perception, with the Flanders Department of Foreign Affairs sharing knowledge with other countries regarding the preventive approach to radicalization, and a media strategy countering polarizing coverage.

61. The Working Group was informed that among the measures taken was financial support provided by the Ministry of the Interior, at the federal level, to 109 cities and municipalities, which determine their own priorities, with annual additional subsidies to 10 more. Initiatives from Communities and Regions included a helpline for parents, interfaith dialogue, training of front-line professionals on identity development for Muslim youth, and support to families or peers. The Working Group commends those efforts, and recommends that a more extensive study be conducted in order to better inform current and future measures, and that longer-term structured frameworks and approaches be adopted.

62. Against the backdrop of that spectrum of measures, the Working Group emphasizes that focus must be placed on preventive as well as rehabilitative measures that respond to the immediate and the root causes of the foreign fighter phenomenon, with full respect for human rights. Punitive measures should be followed up by magistrates, in order to ensure the right to a fair trial and confidence in the justice system.

63. The Working Group also received information on action that has been ongoing in the city of Brussels since 2012 and is coordinated at the mayoral level. The two key objectives are managing the risk of those who are being radicalized, and preventing radicalization. The approach to prevention encompasses informing the public, training professionals among those in contact with at-risk groups and providing them with tools, and developing a supportive context, including through protocols with schools and other services for referring people to the appropriate unit. The programme has worked with 40 families and individuals since 2013, both indirectly and directly, including persons who are considering joining or have already joined ISIL or Al-Nusrah Front. The methodology reportedly involves behavioural indicators, interview procedures, protocols for making contact and developing a framework for disengagement through partnership with the individual's family, school or other relevant actors.

64. Among the challenges identified in implementing those measures were the need for institutional coordination and understanding of one's own level and role; the fact that confidential information gained in a professional capacity cannot be shared despite the duty to report, as in the case of social workers who face information requests from the police; the requirement for methodological tools to operationalize academic findings; and the need to build confidence in local communities to facilitate requests for help.

65. The authorities reported that all military staff are trained in the principles of international humanitarian law and human rights law, and extra courses are foreseen for all staff prior to deployment in the field. An additional five-week programme on armed conflict and fundamental principles relating to human rights is also provided for some officers. The Working Group commends those efforts, and encourages similar training focused on human rights for all staff of services dealing with the foreign fighter phenomenon, notably the police.

66. The Working Group also learned of measures and efforts regarding foreign fighters in the city of Antwerp, where initiatives are reportedly taken at the individual and group levels. Individual programmes aim to reintegrate radicalized youngsters by re-establishing communication with family, as well as providing psychosocial support for parents and families. Group programmes support organizations and institutions such as schools, mosques and youth organizations through sensitization support and training.

67. Challenges noted in implementing security and social policy included the fact that community members may have a larger transnational identity and that there are no clear guidelines or support on how to be a Muslim in a secular society.

68. One specific concern is that radicalized individuals are placed on no-fly lists when they are identified as a threat, but the lists are not updated once the individuals have been reintegrated, thus potentially resulting in unnecessary travel restrictions. The Working

Group reiterates the need to balance concern for the protection of human rights and rehabilitation on the one hand, and security on the other.

69. The city of Liège appointed a radicalization prevention coordinator in October 2014. A local intersectoral consultative group was also established, covering areas such as justice departments and schools. An action plan has been developed for sensitization on intercultural issues and addressing discrimination with schools, sports clubs and youth clubs, as well as providing psychosocial support.

70. It was brought to the attention of the Working Group that one of the key challenges in programme implementation was overcoming the silo structure of intersectoral work. Also, schools need time to adjust, as this is the first time that they are working on terrorism issues. Other considerations are the time investment for coordination and consultation, the stigmatization of communities and threats and corresponding hindrances for social cohesion, as well as the need to strike a balance between public security and human rights.

71. In the municipality of Anderlecht, projects have been developed to support mosques in addressing radicalization, through visits and conferences on issues such as resilience and addressing multiple identities. The programme also involves training opportunities for persons in mosques and visits to different places of worship to share different traditions. A future project will invite a former jihadist from France who had been in Afghanistan and in prison, to explain his choices to students.

72. It was noted that 12 persons from Anderlecht had left or attempted to leave for the Syrian Arab Republic, 5 of whom had died in combat, 2 had failed to leave and 5 had returned. The unemployment rate in Anderlecht is 25 per cent, and 29 per cent of the population is of North African or sub-Saharan African descent. There are neighbourhoods that serve as the first points of arrival for new migrants, where the church and mosque play a role in cohesion. Anderlecht was also the location in which the Sharia4Belgium group was reportedly most active.

73. It was asserted that the municipality of Vilvoorde has one of the highest levels of foreign fighters leaving the country. There were 28 reported departures, 5 deaths and 8 returnees, 3 of whom lived in Vilvoorde, 1 had died and the others were in prison. The first departures had taken place in 2012, in some cases with more than one person from the same family leaving. They were reportedly associated with Sharia4Belgium and with protests against an anti-Islamic movie.

74. In response, an integrated plan has been developed. It operates on three levels: prevention, creating alliances with the police, and working with returnees. The Working Group observes that a clear balance must be struck between repressive measures such as police searches, and the need to build trust with communities, including to earn their collaboration.

75. Reasons for return include the birth of a child and promises that have not been fulfilled. One reintegrated returnee is reported to be back in school and with a student job. Reintegration of returnees has reportedly posed dilemmas, such as political sensitivity around their occupation of government-funded social housing in areas where there is anti-returnee sentiment, and stigmatization of their children in schools. It is reported that it is unclear what the role of the city is in addressing the stigma.

76. The Working Group met with civil society organizations working with the families of foreign fighters. It also learned of initiatives by Muslim organizations, such as texting friends fighting abroad and asking them to return home.

Administration of justice

77. The Working Group was informed that out of the 46 individuals indicted in the Sharia4Belgium trial, 45 had been convicted, including alleged jihadists and recruiters. One had been acquitted and 4 had appealed. The judgment of 11 February 2015 pronounced Sharia4Belgium a terrorist group based on analysis of its website and alleged evidence of organized indoctrination of young people, as well as the recruitment of young people for combat. Members were also convicted for leadership of a terrorist group, carrying a 15-year sentence, participation in a terrorist group, incurring a 5-year sentence, and for terrorist threats. Of the 46 members that had gone to the Syrian Arab Republic, it was reported that there were indications that 9 had been killed, 7 had returned to Belgium and 30 were still active in the Syrian Arab Republic.

78. The Working Group was informed that, in the Sharia4Belgium case, 37 persons were sentenced in absentia by default. Those whose deaths could not be proven were convicted. The courts also granted partially suspended sentences for returnees. Additional information indicates that persons sentenced to imprisonment for 5 years or more in the Belgian system can have their Belgian nationality revoked under article 23 (2) of the Nationality Code. The Working Group expresses its concern that such decisions may have the effect, intended or unintended, of preventing the return of Belgian citizens and denying the opportunity for deradicalization, reintegration and rehabilitation in society.

79. At the time of the Working Group's visit to Belgium, 90 foreign fighters had already been convicted and many additional convictions have since been made. The Working Group learned that a number of persons charged with, or convicted of, terrorism are currently in prison in Belgium. It is reported that for a conviction, it must be proven that a person is a member of a terrorist group with the knowledge that his or her participation contributes to the commission of a crime or a felony by the terrorist group. All charged terrorists are held in single cells and have limited contact with other prisoners.

European level

80. Within the European Union, the Belgian Minister of the Interior has, since 2013, organized meetings of a small group of the member States most affected by the phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The meetings are held on the margins of the Justice and Home Affairs Council and are intended to assist the Council's work. Belgium also participates in the Council Working Party on Terrorism (International Aspects), which focuses on external aspects of the fight against terrorism, European Union policy, and action to help third countries fight the phenomenon.

81. The Working Group learned that the European Parliament is currently considering a motion for resolution on prevention of radicalization and recruitment of European citizens by terrorist organizations. It includes a proposal for preventing radicalization in prisons. The Working Group urges extensive and meaningful consultation with all stakeholders in the process of assessing of those proposals, and the inclusion of human rights reviews and consideration of prison reform.

82. Belgium held the chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe from November 2014 to May 2015. The Brussels ministerial meeting of 19 May 2015 led to the adoption of a political declaration against extremism and radicalization, accompanied by an action plan, as well as the adoption of the Additional Protocol to the Council of Europe Convention on the Prevention of Terrorism. The protocol, which focuses on foreign terrorist fighters, includes the implementation of aspects of criminal justice contained in Security Council resolution 2178 (2014).

83. It is noteworthy that, inter alia, the Council of Europe action plan aims to reinforce the legal framework against terrorism and violent extremism, and to prevent and fight violent radicalization through concrete measures in the public sector, in particular in schools and prisons and on the Internet. The Working Group agrees with those elements of the action plan that acknowledge the critical need to emphasize the use of school curricula in Europe to foster dialogue about democratic culture and intercultural dialogue.

84. The Working Group was informed that despite the fact that there are estimated to be about 5,000 foreign fighters of European origin, there have been very few convictions of foreign fighters. That is largely attributed to the lack of evidence, notably from the Syrian Arab Republic and Iraq. As such, much of the evidence is culled from social media. The Working Group recommends heightened cooperation at the European and international levels for evidence gathering and information sharing, including building on existing data exchange experiences.

International level

85. At the multilateral level, Belgium is an active member of the anti-ISIL coalition, both at the level of military involvement and in terms of participation in coalition working groups. Belgium, while not a member of the Global Counterterrorism Forum, participates in its meetings of experts on the issue of foreign terrorist fighters. Belgium also cooperates with some subsidiary bodies of the Security Council, such as with regard to the implementation of resolutions 1373 (2001) and 1267 (1999).

86. With respect to the application of Security Council resolution 2178 (2014), as mentioned above, it is reported that the Belgian legislative framework is in full compliance with the obligations contained in the resolution, in particular the anti-terrorist provisions on participation and leadership of a terrorist group (Criminal Code, art. 140), supply and attendance of training for terrorism (Criminal Code, arts. 140 quater and quinquies) and the provision of assistance, including financial assistance, to a terrorist acting alone (Criminal Code, art. 141). Additionally, fundraising in order to finance terrorism is considered by the Brussels Court of Appeal as an act of participation in a terrorist group, according to its judgments of 26 June 2008, 1 December 2010 and 21 February 2013.

VIII. Human rights issues

87. With continuing threats of terrorism and fighters returning from conflict zones abroad, Belgium has employed an array of multilevel initiatives that include prevention policies, deradicalization programmes, counter-narrative campaigns and criminal prosecutions, as well as monitoring and administrative sanctions.

88. Despite the impressive range of actors involved in deradicalization programmes and counter-terrorism initiatives, the larger focus has been on security, repression and prevention, while human rights issues and social and economic considerations have been assessed to a lesser degree. While acknowledging that there are overwhelming and legitimate concerns regarding national security against the backdrop of recent terrorist attacks, the Working Group stresses the need to adopt a human rights-based approach to address root causes and motivations of foreign fighters, many of which stem from social and economic factors rather than religious fundamentalism.

89. As mentioned above, the Working Group was informed that most of those who become foreign fighters have a non-European family background, are members of the lower socioeconomic classes and face particular difficulties in accessing employment, housing, health and education. Reported discrimination in the job and real estate market, educational

deficiencies, along with a lack of a strong sense of identity and belonging are factors that may fuel the desire to fight abroad in conflicts like the one in the Syrian Arab Republic.

90. These social and economic concerns are human rights concerns which need to be effectively addressed alongside security and preventive measures. The issue of identity was repeatedly raised as a critical factor in the Working Group's meetings with interlocutors. Third-generation Belgians of North African descent are still sometimes considered by Belgian society as Moroccan, for example, notwithstanding the fact that they may have been born and raised in Belgium. The building of democratic values, intercultural dialogue, education and awareness around the issue of identity can foster greater social cohesion, which in turn assists in tackling the motivational factors prompting young Belgians to go and fight abroad.

91. The Belgian authorities assert that, given the serious nature of terrorist offences, particular investigation methods, such as wiretapping or proactive investigations specific to serious crimes, are now applicable to all behaviours listed in book II, title I *ter*, of the Criminal Code relating to terrorist offences, and not only to the acts referred to in section 137 of the Code. These methods therefore apply to the new offence of travelling abroad in order to commit a criminal offence under section 140 *sexies* of the Code. The Working Group was informed that surveillance takes place under the control of the judiciary.

92. The Working Group calls for respect for human rights in the implementation of all measures, notably for the rights to privacy, to freedom of expression and movement and to a nationality. In that regard, the work of the parliamentary Privacy Commission is critical.

93. In the context of the broader international community, special consideration must also be given to the rights of Belgian children, of foreign fighters under 18 years of age recruited into armed groups, and of Belgian women whose activities in conflict areas may constitute sexual slavery and violation of the right to security of the person.

94. The Working Group reiterates the fundamental need to ensure adherence to and consistency with international human rights law and international humanitarian law in the implementation of numerous measures to counter the phenomenon of foreign fighters and terrorism. Furthermore, any measure that infringes on human rights, such as the right to privacy, the right to be free from arbitrary deprivation of liberty, the right to freedom of movement and the right to freedom of expression, must be necessary and proportionate to the specific risk being addressed and should be accompanied by adequate procedural safeguards, as well as effective and independent oversight to ensure against human rights violations by the authorities.

IX. Returnees

95. As noted above, it is reported that 128 foreign fighters have returned to Belgium. At the time of the Working Group's visit, there were 108 male returnees and around 19 female returnees. The majority of returnees, 67 of them, were aged between 20 to 30, while 8 were reported to be under 20 years of age. Exact figures are difficult to verify, a task further complicated by false registrations of death.

96. Reportedly, foreign fighters return for a variety of reasons. Some may experience the fragmentation of and fighting among the different groups in the Syrian Arab Republic, such as ISIL, Al-Nusrah Front and Al-Qaida, and in the process may end up fighting their friends, and thus becoming disenchanted. A number of returnees may have gone abroad looking for adventure and return disillusioned, others get fatigued or are unable to adjust to the daily regime and diet, while others miss their families and want to return.

97. A number of returnees reportedly come back with a mission. The attacks in Belgium fuel Islamophobia and feed into the agenda of ISIL, including by making Muslims feel unsafe in Europe and prompting them to begin to feel that a caliphate in the Syrian Arab Republic may indeed be their only possible home.

98. It is reported that ISIL authorizes fighters to leave only in certain situations, such as a wedding or imminent death of a family member, or for the purposes of recruiting, raising funds or committing an attack. It is also reported that those wishing to leave for other reasons may be executed.

99. The authorities determine the threat posed by returnees partly based on their reasons for departure or return. The "hard-core jihadis" are reported to be the most menacing and are linked to security incidents, such as the Verviers raids, while frustrated "rebels" or disillusioned idealists are also known to execute attacks. Depending on the level of threat they are deemed to pose, returnees may be monitored by police or other services upon their return.

100. According to government officials, foreign fighters and suspected foreign fighters fall within the jurisdiction of the ordinary courts and enjoy the same rights as any accused during arrest and detention, interrogation and hearings, including with regard to convictions and the opportunity to lodge appeals.

101. The Working Group was informed that detainees suspected of terrorism-related offences or convicted of such offences under articles 137 to 141 of the Criminal Code, including prisoners known as foreign terrorist fighters are treated in accordance with the principles of the law of 12 January 2012 concerning prison administration and the legal status of inmates. The usual approach to classification, standardization and the establishment of safe reintegration is also applicable to them. No distinction on the basis of geographical or conflict-related criteria is made vis-à-vis the management of their detention or rehabilitation.

102. Additionally, it is reported that in Belgium the courts provide information to judicial and administrative authorities, inform and assist victims of crime, inform citizens and monitor offenders in the execution of the sentence or the measure decided by the judge. As part of that jurisdiction, there is currently no distinction made on the basis of whether the offender is a foreign fighter or not. The monitoring of conditions imposed by the court is done according to methods applied to any case.

103. The Working Group notes the need for effective, structured reintegration and rehabilitation programmes for returnees. The observation was made to the Working Group that this may be partly the result of the fact the competence for reintegration programmes does not lie at the national level. It was also reported that the lack of a coherent programme may serve as a deterrent for some foreign fighters to return, and safe return involving the protection of their human rights may need to be coordinated more among local authorities and families.

104. In that respect, the Working Group reiterates its recommendation for an integrated national approach to foreign fighters involving all levels of the administration. It is encouraged by the work being undertaken at the local level in the city of Brussels, in Vilvoorde and among the French-speaking community, and recommends that such work be considered for evaluation and possible application throughout Belgium should its effectiveness be proven. Efforts should encompass both psychosocial and legal support to returnees, including for addressing trauma and reconstructing their identity and family and community ties. Support to families and initiatives to remove the stigma for those not convicted of serious crimes could be especially useful.

105. The Working Group supports the application of proven good practices, and notes promising programmes such as the Danish Aarhus model, particularly with mentorship, being employed in municipalities such as Vilvoorde and in the French-speaking community. The Working Group also acknowledges that the specific context presented by Belgium may mean that approaches utilized elsewhere may not fully apply or produce the same results.

X. Conclusions and recommendations

106. **Given the constellatioa of actors involved, the proliferation of initiatives on foreign fighters, the complex political context and the aforementioned socioeconomic disparities, as well as the potential threat posed by the prolongation of the phenomenon, the Working Group deems it critical to ensure effective collaboration between the various entities addressing this issue in moving towards a sustainable solution. In this regard, the Working Group recommends strengthening the above-mentioned national plan and fully integrating it through the broadest possible participation, ensuring that it is informed by multidisciplinary in-depth research and analysis.**

107. **The plan should yield a clear understanding and valuing of respective expertise and roles. It should also attract the necessary resources for full implementation immediately and in the medium and long term, with a budget that is based on consultation and strikes more of a balance between expenditure on preventive and social measures. It must adopt a human rights-based approach in all stages of implementation, and particular attention should be paid to the inclusion of especially affected communities, with clear indicators, as well as monitoring and evaluation of related programmes.**

108. **While the Working Group was informed that Belgian legislation attempts to strike a balance between security and human rights, the Working Group recommends that government efforts at combating the phenomenon place strong emphasis on the social dimension, including integration, equality and non-discrimination, in keeping with international human rights standards and the obligations of Belgium as a State party to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and all the other core human rights instruments. Special consideration should be given to addressing issues that lead to Islamophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment in the country, with recognition in schools and cultural programming of Muslims and the history and contributions of migrants to Belgian society.**

109. **Similar initiatives are encouraged from civil society organizations and grass-roots projects, particularly emanating from the Muslim community. Parents and families may also need to acquire the awareness and skills to address the needs of children with diverse heritage.**

110. **A clear definition of a foreign terrorist fighter adopted by the federal Government, and related guidelines, could also help to ensure that those who are reintegrated or have not yet left for the Syrian Arab Republic would not be treated by the authorities in the same way as convicted terrorists.**

111. **The Working Group stresses that greater social cohesion will mitigate long-term security risks, and that focus on strong support to communities and families can also lay the groundwork for the optimization of measures. In this respect, intercultural institutions, policy and dialogue would be instrumental in building**

community ties, and the Working Group recommends building on the foundation being developed in this regard, such as the Minister for Civil Integration in the Flemish region, and egalitarian staffing policies.

112. Similarly, education has been consistently raised as a crucial vehicle for awareness-raising and dialogue. The Working Group supports raising awareness in schools and related platforms where student dialogue can take place, particularly from the primary level of education. Promoting inclusive education of citizens and developing positive counter-narratives against violent extremist propaganda can also be implemented through education and awareness-raising programmes.

113. Deradicalization in prisons should continue to be prioritized and implemented effectively, within the framework of respect for human rights.

114. Coordination was a recurrent theme among the Working Group's interlocutors. Local authority staff and others noted that institutional coordination was crucial for the effectiveness of programmes, as was a clear understanding of one's level and role in the larger federal system. Such coordination could prove critical in, for example, centralizing information from different agencies with a view to identifying the best entry points for action and standardization, as well as the sharing of methods and expertise. In the absence of such coordination between federal and local levels, for example on policy, public trust at the local level may be undermined as there is no coherent message or clear policy direction. The development of specific entities and a common database accessible to authorities and actors at all levels, including prevention workers, could be instrumental in ensuring coordination.

115. In terms of action at the European and international levels, the Working Group recommends improved coordination, including within the Council of Europe, the European Union and, crucially, between foreign fighters' countries of origin and countries through which they transit. It also strongly recommends effective cooperation for information sharing and evidence gathering to support legal proceedings. In this respect, it commends Belgium for its exchanges with Eurojust.

116. The Working Group emphasizes that State responses to foreign fighters must balance punitive measures with preventive ones and ensure rehabilitative opportunities for returning fighters. It recommends prioritizing the deradicalization and rehabilitation of returnees. While conducting its global research on the issue of foreign fighters, the Working Group received information on a series of existing rehabilitation and reintegration programmes that the Government of Belgium may wish to consider. The Danish Aarhus programme attempts to convince and assist individuals to return, while the German Hayat programme focuses on deterring aspiring foreign fighters from leaving, or if they do, urging them to refrain from engaging in acts of violence and to return home in coordination with the authorities. The Channel programme, a multi-agency scheme under the Home Office, and the Glasgow Al-Furqan Islamic initiative, both based in the United Kingdom, work with individuals who are vulnerable to radicalization.

117. In conclusion, the Working Group believes that Belgian society is at a moment of significant opportunity to move forward in addressing the complex phenomenon of foreign fighters. The Working Group urges it to make every effort at integration in that process.